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Peripheral Vision-Makers

Petr Szczepanik, *Screen Industries in East-Central Europe*
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Petr Szczepanik's *Screen Industries in East-Central Europe* is a collection of studies, researched and written throughout the 2010s, addressing what it means to be a film or television producer in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary. It shows local producers grappling with the forces of globalisation and digitalisation, negotiating various system of national and international investment, and dealing with their own status as members of post-socialist, "peripheral" nations. The contemporary realities of East-Central European production are seen to bring challenges as well as opportunities, to enforce serious limits as well as yield occasional successes. This study thus makes for a bold departure from the traditional focus in coverage of this region's media, which tends to be restricted to a concern either with arthouse cinema or political propaganda. Where other such studies have been typically more interested in the aesthetics of auteurs or the determinations of "national politics," this book is concerned with "the everyday reality of media production on the ground" — with the circumstances, working practices, and self-conceptions of the "hands-on decision makers" involved in "initiating and managing the production process" (1).

Szczepanik comes ideally equipped for such a task, armed as he is with the material he has amassed from numerous interviews with local producers as well as from his own experiences of consultation, writing industry reports, and reviewing both grant applications and scripts within the film and television industry. This copious empirical material is then synthesised with Szczepanik's academic expertise, as he draws concepts from international film scholarship to frame his material but authoritatively adjusts these concepts to the specific, often distinct realities of East-Central European screen industries.

Such an adjustment can be seen in the book's Introduction, a long and in-depth historical and conceptual primer for the study in which, when addressing the "smallness and peripherality" of these film industries, Szczepanik cites two important existing studies of small-nation media production — that of Mette Hjort and of Ruth McElroy and Caitriona Noonan¹⁾ — but revises their respective concepts of "creativity under constraints" and "translational imperative," arguing that East-Central European pro-

1) See, for instance, Mette Hjort and Ib Bondebjerg, *The Danish Directors: Dialogues on a Contemporary National Cinema* (Bristol: Intellect, 2001); Ruth McElroy and Caitriona Noonan, *Producing British Television Drama: Local Production in a Global Era* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

ducers lack that sense of energizing national “claustrophobia,” that disposition to push across “cultural, national, and linguistic borders,” evident in other small cinemas (26). Szczepanik similarly engages here with Mathieu and Strandvad’s²⁾ concept of the “High Framework” of production institutions, which he adjusts to what he calls the “High Circumscription” model — a means of stressing the “negative aspects” of East-Central Europe’s production systems, the “constraints on producer agency” (18). The analysis that follows will operate, in a highly detailed and nuanced manner, between these poles of “circumscription” and “agency”: between the constraints imposed by small national media industries (themselves “continually transformed by large-scale transnational forces”), and the “strategies and tactics,” the forms of critical resistance, with which local media workers deal with their constrained, peripheral status (31, 25).

The book’s first chapter is concerned with the perspectives and self-conceptions of a range of Czech producers, whose work is categorised according to a useful typology (adopted from the Czech Film Fund) of Mainstream Arthouse, Mainstream Commercial, Marginal Arthouse and Marginal Commercial. Unsurprisingly, among the producers surveyed, operating as they do in distinct spheres, differences of attitude are revealed, but what emerges forcefully throughout this chapter is a general sense of the limits, challenges, and inadequacies of the Czech Republic as a post-socialist, peripheral media producer. For producers from the Arthouse sectors, one such inadequacy is the lack of time or resources allowed for a project’s development — a part of the process that some consider defining of a “true producer.” Both an Arthouse and a Commercial producer concur about the currently deficient state of “dramaturgy” — a distinctively Central European practice roughly akin to script editing, but historically encompassing much more — and this, interestingly, has spawned a nostalgia for state-socialist days, when dramaturgy played a decisive (and, for many, essential) role in film development. Other issues here include the sense of disempowerment, exploitation, and “precarization” experienced by producers at the hands of public institutions (with one producer pushed “to the limits of legality” by tenuous and unpredictable financing); the pressure to engage in international networking and partnerships, an imperative embraced by younger, Mainstream-oriented producers but met with distrust by their older, Marginal-oriented counterparts; and a frustration at the limitations imposed by the Czech Republic’s “small market size” and its lack of “internationally appealing themes,” conditions that, on the one hand, dictate a “homogenization” of content and, on the other, make that content a tough sell abroad (72, 75).

Chapter 2, which turns from a broader perspective to a case study of a specific producer, makes for a nice change of pace, balancing the frustrations expressed in the first chapter with a striking example of “how peripheral market limitations might be overcome” (81). The producer here is Ewa Puszczyńska, known for her collaborations with director Paweł Pawlikowski on the international arthouse hit and Foreign Language Oscar winner *Ida* (2013) and its also very successful follow-up *Cold War* (*Zimna wojna*; 2018). This chapter presents Puszczyńska as a vital “intermediary” figure who has skillfully managed to reconcile Pawlikowski’s often highly idiosyncratic and demanding working methods with the conventions of the Polish film industry. She — together with Opus Films, the company at which she is based — has also actively mediated between national and international film worlds, promoting “trans-border collaboration” to “increase production values and circulation” and foster “mutual learn-

2) Chris Mathieu and Sara Malou Strandvad, “Is This What We Should Be Comparing When Comparing Film Production Regimes? A Systematic Typological Scheme and Application,” *Creative Industries Journal* 1, no. 2 (2008), 141–148.

ing and cultural exchange” (90). This chapter illuminates the importance of international networks and festival exposure for “peripheral markets,” and the way international acclaim can translate back into domestic box office (*Ida*’s multiple international awards caused its “initially low domestic admissions to more than double”) (92). Szczepanik also offers an important corrective or supplement to auteurist approaches, showing both how auteurist idiosyncrasies are actually made workable by the mediations of the producer, and how the discourse of auteurism can itself serve as part of a film’s promotional strategy, cannily utilised as an internationally saleable “brand.”

Satisfying as this chapter’s case study is, one question it might raise, is why a Polish producer has achieved such a singular success and not, say, a Czech one. Some further comparative discussion might have been useful. The previous chapter did suggest that younger Czech producers were also welcoming of international networks, like Puszczynska, but there might have been some benefit in pursuing more detailed examples that attempted or even came close to Puszczynska’s attempts (the Czech-focused co-productions *I, Olga Hepnarová* (Já, Olga Hepnarová; 2016) or *The Painted Bird* (Nabarvené ptáče; 2019), for instance) — examples that might have illuminated contextual or strategic differences.

Chapter 3 surveys the phenomenon of “service production,” whereby East-Central European film studios and crews provide services, principally technical and “below the line,” for international productions. In another highly nuanced application of the idea of circumscribed agency, Szczepanik challenges the neo-Marxist theorisation of service production as a narrative of Hollywood’s “international hegemony” and a subjugated and disempowered “global workforce” (110). For Szczepanik, this account is too US-centric and uni-directional, and wrongly treats local film workers as mere “victims” rather than as “social actors” responding to “global forces” (111, 112). Focusing on the Czech and Hungarian industries (which compete as regional service-production leaders), this chapter acknowledges the learning that these local-international partnerships have enabled — in both directions — and notes how this learning is widely perceived by its Czech participants “as a positive career accelerator” (131). Yet Szczepanik also shows how, in the Czech context at least, these experiences have not entailed any real shifts in the firmly demarcated hierarchies of service production, with local personnel only very rarely attaining more “privileged positions” on international films, and have also seen little crossover with, or benefit for, the sphere of native-language productions. He attributes these limitations, though, to artificial barriers erected by the Czech film industry itself.

In Chapter 4, focused more exclusively on the Czech industry, Szczepanik examines the minority co-production – which is defined either financially, as an arrangement in which a co-producing partner “provides less than the largest share of financing,” or in official terms under “bilateral treaties” or the European Convention on Co-Production (140). For Szczepanik, minority co-production also represents a “hybrid between the foreign production services and majority co-productions traditionally considered national films” (146). Unlike Poland or Hungary, the Czech film industry was slow to embrace minority co-production but by the end of the 2000s recognised that this was a necessary means of expanding “beyond its provincial borders” (147). A trend towards minority or otherwise more modest types of co-production also grew out of the perceived failure of the *majority* co-production model, in which foreign funding requirements bring the risk of compromised artistic visions or muddled national specificities (159). The contemporary Czech co-production ventures are a more discriminating, “measured and pragmatic” affair. According to Szczepanik’s typology, these may take the form of “true love” collaborations based on a natural “affinity” between co-producing partners; of “quasi-foreign production services” pursued for pragmatic, financial reasons; or of partnerships based on an assumed “long-term reciprocity” (156). In whatever form, minority co-productions are widely recognised (es-

pecially by younger producers) as a means of gaining “symbolic capital” through festival awards and of enabling “knowledge transfer.” Towards the end of this chapter, Szczepanik notes that there are, “thankfully,” fewer and fewer “stereotypical foreign characters” or “transborder storylines” in recent co-productions — one of the rare places in the book where aesthetic judgement, as well as consideration of the impact of production realities on what the viewer actually sees onscreen, subtly creep in (159). Many commentators would certainly share the implicit distaste for “Euro-pudding”-style hodgepodge, but there is an underlying evaluative criteria here that might have been brought more firmly to the fore.

The focus of Chapter 5, which Szczepanik co-authored with Eva Pjajčíková, is on “Public Service Television as a Producer.” This begins with an interesting, and sobering, comparison of different regional television systems. In Poland, at least up until the time of writing, public service television was based on “top-down decision-making” — a system dominated, as in Hungary, by the ruling political party. By contrast, Czech public television, in a policy of “decentralization” begun in 2012, introduced the phenomenon of the “creative producer,” a tier of “middle-level executives” who oversee the production of a project with greater or lesser “hands-on” involvement. At the heart of this chapter is an in-depth case study of the development and production of one particular series, the historical saga *The First Republic* (První republika; 2014–2018). This makes for a fascinating case of a show pulled in different directions by the conflicting interests of its makers. Initially conceived by its writers as a “complex, gritty” drama in the mould of Anglo-American “quality television,” the series ended up, through the influence of more commercially-minded participants, as a mixture of heritage drama and soap opera. The saga of *The First Republic*’s making amply fulfils the authors’ concern to illustrate “the transformative conditions” of local public television needing to preserve “its market share” but also wanting “to match the standards of imported high-end series” like those of HBO. This case study also serves to interrogate the realities of the “creative producer” system, showing here the producer’s inability to exercise real independence or defend “creativity and ‘common welfare’ over market orientation” (187).

From publicly-funded attempts to match HBO, Chapter 6 turns to HBO itself — to the US network’s European arm and the original programming it has created in the Czech Republic. From the beginning of its operations in East-Central Europe, HBO sought to root itself in the local environment and make nationally-based stories with an emphasis on “authenticity” and serious themes, the aim initially being to differentiate the HBO brand from local broadcasters and (if its executives are to be believed) to “cultivate” the “local production environment” (205). The wide “international buzz” created by HBO Europe’s first “event miniseries” — Agnieszka Holland’s accomplished drama *Burning Bush* (Hořící keř; 2013), about the events following the self-immolation of political protester Jan Palach in 1969 — marked an expansion in HBO Europe’s ambitions. From this point on, the corporation concerned itself with the creation of an exclusive library of on-demand content for the region and, more recently, it has embraced “a pan-European (and global) strategy” in competition with Netflix and other streaming platforms, aiming to produce “premium content that is at once highly local and highly exportable across and beyond HBO Europe territories” (204). This chapter reveals HBO as a distinctive form of transnational engagement — customising itself to local markets and then exporting back its own “westernised” version of local culture — and offers a final, suggestive discussion of how this multinational corporation savvily exploits locally specific issues and identities in an era of “resurgent populist nationalisms” (208).

The book’s final chapter, cowritten with Dorota Vašíčková, looks at the seriously under-explored world of short-form web television. Focused predominantly on the Czech web-TV service Stream, this

chapter is a compelling study of the way a commercially run platform came, for a period of time, to embody the values of “public service.” This in turn illustrates how, in a “multiplatform ecosystem,” formerly clear-cut distinctions “between public and corporate media are no longer possible” (219). Among the fresh and unorthodox kinds of content it cultivated, Stream was particularly notable as a refuge for political satire — something that would no longer be permissible on public television. At the same time, the authors again assert the contradictions between creative ambition and the commercialised nature of the online video market, and their narrative of Stream’s development concludes with its adopting “a more straightforwardly commercial” approach based on “cheap acquisitions,” compilation videos, and clickbait (236). There are incipient and perhaps promising developments elsewhere though, such as Czech public television’s own move into web video. Yet the book’s short concluding section suggests that, overall, the constraints on these already highly circumscribed screen industries may only be increasing in a post-Covid world, as even independent producers are turned into “mere production service providers” by their distribution arrangements with global streaming services (240).

What impresses, as one charts the various institutions and participants covered here, is the way Szczepanik’s acute attention to detail serves his awareness of wider trends, as case studies, personal accounts, and anecdotes are used rigorously to illustrate larger national and transnational developments. The details of production practices and industry “lore” are always engaging, and sometimes amusing, in themselves, and the producers interviewed (much easier to access, Szczepanik notes, than their Hollywood equivalents would be) are candid and expansive. Szczepanik lets his film workers’ stories and self-perceptions be heard without judgement or side-taking.

Inevitably, as with any study, there are issues and realities one would like to have seen investigated further (as regards, for instance, the effective neutering of “subversive” political content on Czech public television: how, exactly, did this happen? How explicit or implicit were the strictures involved?). If much of the book’s focus falls on the Czech Republic, this is probably preferable to a study that might have grown unwieldy and involved unnecessary reiteration of detail. As things stand, the Polish and Hungarian screen industries serve the author well as points of contrast, perhaps reinforcing the idea of agency-within-circumscription by indicating the slightly different routes these three similarly situated, equally peripheral industries have taken.

The book’s focus on institutions, practices and professionals’ self-conceptions may mean largely bracketing aesthetic judgements and critiques of specific films. However, as in previous works (such as his invaluable and stunningly in-depth Czech-language study of Barrandov studios, *Továrna Barrandov*³⁾), Szczepanik performs a vital service for other researchers of this same region of media by painstakingly establishing crucial industrial realities at both the macro and micro levels, both as they are externally constituted and as they are internally lived. Such work is likely to inform and stimulate scholars of other persuasions, and indeed Szczepanik himself suggests one way that his institutional research might illuminate media texts by citing Georgina Born’s call to connect ethnographic study and critical analysis, to trace how texts “mediate” “the social relations and material conditions of their collective production” (241). The book itself already enacts such an approach in its revealing examination of *The First Republic*, a show whose aesthetic inconsistencies mediate its conflicted production circumstances, but there are so many other tantalising paths opened up by this rich, impressively researched, and expertly framed study.

3) Petr Szczepanik, *Továrna Barrandov: Svět filmařů a politická moc 1945–1970* [*The Barrandov Factory: The World of Filmmakers and Political Power 1945–1970*] (Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2016).

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